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# "Lu-li-lunacy and Sorrow:" The Grotesque in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*

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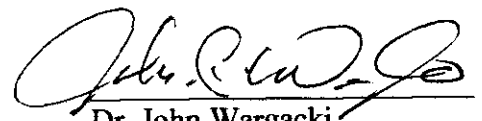
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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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Department of English,  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Balkun', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Mary Balkun,  
Thesis Mentor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Wargacki', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. John Wargacki  
Second Reader

Nicole Homer  
August 2010

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**The Grotesque in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp***

The use of the grotesque in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* and, in particular, in his depictions of sexual, romantic and familial relationships, reflects the world in which he creates; this world, too, is grotesque, chimeric, and at odds with itself. In particular his exploration of gender roles and norms as they manifest themselves within the changing reality of the twentieth century necessitates a grotesque perspective. The characters in his novels, which he began writing in 1969, reflect and inhabit a tumultuous period of gender destabilization which continues to the present day. This mimics the changing dynamic between genders during the so-called second wave of the women’s liberation movement. Irving’s examination of American culture in terms of the institution of marriage, the traditional concept of and roles within parenthood, and rapidly evolving sexuality forefront the tension between these values and the ways this tension doubled itself by causing a tension in and about masculinity.

Irving presents the grotesque body in the form of the transsexual body. This presentation of a male/female mixture challenges the concepts of hypermasculinity and innate femininity. Further, the exploration of amputations as a manifestation of the body’s borderless nature reflects the diminishing boundaries between male and female.

The truth as an absolute, especially during America’s sexual revolution, is impossible to achieve. The placement of the individual – as male or female, as husband, wife or child, as audience or creator, even as an impermeable or untransgressable body – is always suspect in the grotesque. While a static truth is impossible, in both the realm of the grotesque and in the dynamic relationship of and between genders, the grotesque offers the reader the one reassuring universal truth: life begets death begets life.

Nicole Homer  
15 August 2010  
English 7010

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The use of the grotesque in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* and, in particular, in his depictions of sexual, romantic and familial relationships, reflects the world in which he creates; this world, too, is grotesque, chimeric, and at odds with itself. In particular his exploration of gender roles and norms as they manifest themselves within the changing reality of the twentieth century necessitates a grotesque perspective. The characters in his novels, which he began writing in 1969, reflect and inhabit a tumultuous period of gender destabilization which continues to the present day. As Michael Priestly notes, “[he] imposes a personal order upon the world with the novel, but his characters and stories question the tenability of such order” (Priestley 82). This reflects the changing dynamic between genders during the so-called second wave of the women’s liberation movement. Irving’s examination of American culture in terms of the institution of marriage, the traditional concept of and roles within parenthood, and rapidly evolving sexuality forefront the tension “between a discourse of resistance to female subordination and a discourse of conformity to conventional views of femininity” (Burlinson 301) and the ways this tension doubled itself by causing a tension in and about masculinity.

Irving’s grotesque in relation to sexuality is such that the masculine and feminine become joined, confused, or conflated. This melding occurs on the physical level, as evidenced by his inclusion of transsexual Robert/a Muldoon, and in the arena of gender roles since Garp is a stay-at-home father and homemaker. The ways in which Irving utilizes the grotesque requires an

examination of what this form has historically encompassed and how it has come to operate in the later twentieth century.

Historians agree that the word itself is “derived from the Italian. *La grottesca* and *grottesco* [and] refers? to *grotta* (cave)” (Kayser 19). The caves in question were the “excavated rooms of ancient Roman houses” found, in the fifteenth century, “under more recent buildings [or] ruins” (“Grotesque”). As an adjective used to describe artwork, the grotesque referred to “decorative paintings or sculptures” in the style or manner found within those Roman caves. What was most characteristic of these paintings and sculptures was their “mixture of heterogeneous elements” (Kayser 36). This aspect of the grotesque has endured and, in *The World According to Garp*, becomes a cornerstone of Irving’s challenge to the shifting gender norms of the time.

In the late fifteenth century, when these sites were excavated, the word grotesque was being applied only to the visual arts. Wolfgang Kayser, in his 1957 work *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, describes the grotesque work of artists such as Francisco Goya, Raphael, Agostino Veneziano, Luca Signorelli, Simon Cammermeir, and Johann Henrich Keller as the “monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements,” an art consisting of “monstrous bodies, pieced together of the most diverse members” (24). This is a world of “bastard form” in which “the difference between animal and vegetable forms [is] eliminated” (20). The bastard form is one with strict boundaries; it contains only elements of itself. This calls into question the way in which a body can be bastardized. Using a strict definition of the word, bastardization “reduce[s] from a higher to a lower state” or “modif[ies...] by introducing discordant or disparate elements” (“Bastardization”). While these definitions become especially relevant in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, it is the most common definition that is most telling: “to declare or prove to be a

bastard” (“Bastardization”). The ominous and haunting nature of the bastard is its “questionable origin” (“Bastard”).

It is this question of origin that caused Kayser to view art in which “[t]he heads and limbs of fantastically distorted animals and monsters, often in masklike stylization, are intertwined and give rise, at numerous points, to new shoots, limbs, or excrescences” as having embedded in it “something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister” (23, 21). Kayser offers up the example of caricature, an “imitation of distorted and distinctly ugly reality and its exaggeration of actually existing disproportions,” as a challenge to the traditional definition of art: “an imitation of beautiful nature or as its idealization” (Kayser 30). This challenge directly seeks to align the grotesque - which mixes human, animal and plant elements and does not produce an imitation or idealization of beautiful nature – with art. The idea of the monstrous body forces the audience to question how such a body comes into being. When this idea is applied literally to the transsexual body in Irving’s text and in the changing world of the 1970s, the audience must question not only the literally constructed body but the ever-present construction of gender.

Robert-cum-Roberta Muldoon, described as a “six-foot-four transsexual” and former “tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles” (Irving 187) is, as Irving is quoted as saying, a ““sexual link... someone who really was a man and really was a woman”” (Morris 4). Her importance in the novel as the embodiment of gender destabilization cannot be overestimated: she is the hypermasculine man become woman. Her physical identification as a woman – after a successful sex change operation – calls into question the masculinity of males who identified with her before the change. Her hate mail included a letter from “a high school tight end from Wyoming” who was so “ashamed to be a tight end” now that Robert was Roberta that he was “changing his

position – to linebacker” (Irving 188). Even a slight association with a grotesque body is to be avoided, because if a body can change by choice, what prevents a body from changing without that conscious choice?

Irving’s use of Roberta as both surrogate mother and surrogate father illustrates how slippery the gender roles of Irving’s time had become. Roberta’s relationship with Duncan Garp is traditionally fatherly: the two, briefly, “tried playing catch” but, because of Duncan’s lost eye, content themselves with football diagrams of “all the plays [Roberta] once ran... for the Philadelphia Eagles” (311). While the juxtaposition may initially seem to be the female body in the all-male sphere of professional football, Irving’s telling is more nuanced than that. Roberta “*always* knew [she] should have been a girl” even while she was employed as a tight end (312, emphasis added). The female trapped in a male body and engaged in an all male arena challenges the perception of hypermasculinity as a static identity. Further, that a female gendered person – albeit in a biologically male sexed body – had the fortitude, desire and understanding of football to successfully play the sport highlights the fallacies based in gender stereotypes that there are things (sports, science, math, etc) that women not only can’t do but that they have no desire to do.

If, to justify her participation in and understanding of a violent sport, the argument is made that Roberta’s body was always simply a wishful distortion of a masculine body, one must address the more “mother[ly] and sister[ly]” aspect of her relationship with Duncan (Irving 491). Roberta responds to Duncan’s motorcycle accident in a stereotypically motherly way: guilt. She says, “If you get killed before I die... it will *kill* me!” (492, emphasis in original). Irving crafts Roberta as a physical and emotional mix of masculine and feminine. This mixture evokes a bevy



of emotions from the reader, in part, because the typical American is acculturated to respond to males and females differently.

The letter that Roberta received states that its author “hoped Roberta would get gangbanged by the Oakland Raiders... [because] the Raiders were the most disgusting team in football [and] maybe they would show Roberta how much fun it was to be a woman” (Irving 188). Christoph Martin Weiland noted in 1775 that “several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque” (Kayser 31). This emotional response is ““at once terrifying and hilarious”” (Ludwig Tieck qtd. in Kayser 50). These “clashing contrasts” act “to remove the ground from under our feet” (Kayser 51). The (American) reader’s conflict is one based on norms. One is able to laugh off the letter if it is addressed to Robert because the idea of male-male rape is absurd in pop culture outside of the off-color prison joke. When addressed to Roberta, however, the threat becomes very real. As the letterwriter points out, rape is so common an experience to women that being raped would truly show Roberta the realities of her sex reassignment. Added to this conflict between tragedy and humor is the female gendered writer who the audience is at once attracted to (the implication is that the writer has been a victim of rape herself) and repelled by (she is wishing one of the most intimate violations a body can endure on Roberta). The result is, as Kayser defined it, an annihilating laughter: “reality, the terrestrial, finite world as a whole, is destroyed by humor” (Kayser 54).

Victor Hugo states that ““the grotesque... is everywhere; on the one hand it creates what is deformed and horrible, on the other what is comic and farcical”” (Kayser 57). The grotesque does not seek to soften the blow of the monstrosities on the audience. Kayser argues that “[t]he true depth of the grotesque is revealed only by its confrontation with its opposite, the sublime” (58). For Hugo and to some extent Kayser, the grotesque is “a contrasting device” that allows the

reader to experience the difference of the characters and situations presented. In regards to humor, “the proximity to, and difference from, the comic are made obvious” in the grotesque (59). Terrance Des Pres, in the introduction to *3 By Irving*, writes that Irving, through his writing, demonstrates a “capacity for bounce and resilience and something akin to a hard-minded glee, his determination to face that which *laughs at* and, mindful of all pain, all pathos, *laughs back*” (Pres xi, emphasis in original). Irving’s grotesque is not only a joining of unlike elements but a confrontation of and with the audience’s emotional reaction to those elements.

This reaction “permits... no reconciliation” (Kayser 59). The conflict is vital. The reader’s feelings must remain unresolved. There is inappropriateness in the grotesque as the narrator of *Tristram Shandy* effectively states: “I was several times expelled from churches, because I laughed there, and from brothels, because I was about to pray there” (63). The grotesque embodies the inappropriate juxtaposition. However, it must be noted that “inappropriate” is not a precise enough word because in the grotesque “[t]he author intends to shake the reader’s confidence in his world view by depriving him of the safeguards provided by tradition and society;” this is accomplished when “apparently meaningful things are shown to have no meaning, and familiar objects begin to look strange (61). Put another way, “The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world” (37). It is also not our world as we would have it be. It is not an idealization of the world or its beauty. When the body becomes something the audience is and is not familiar with then the grotesque is being employed to its maximum effect. Irving’s presentation of the altered body and of altered gender expression indeed deprives the audience of the normal safeguards.

The emotional response to Michael Milton’s castration is one of the most overt examples of inappropriateness in the novel. If one focuses on the location and characters involved – and

ignores for the time being the amputation aspect, which will be discussed later – the scene becomes at once more tragic and more laughable. This is largely due to Irving's establishment of Michael Milton as an unsympathetic character. His introduction paints him as average, pompous and filled with a false magnanimousness: he "graduate with indifferent distinction" from prep school and went on to Yale and "[o]nce he knew that you knew he had gone to Yale" he played down its importance (Irving 252-3, emphasis in original). His pretentiousness is a defining trait: though he had only spent his junior year studying in France, "he managed to give you the impression that he'd lived in France all his young life" (253). His arrogance is demonstrated by his assertion to Helen, his professor, whom he barely knows, that "from the first time [he] saw [her, he] wanted to be [her] lover" (254). This is a character that the reader has not been trained to root for so his demise lends itself to being read as a comeuppance.

However, the castration scene occurs three-fifths of the way through the novel; by this point Irving has well established a connection between rape/oppression and amputation so Michael is immediately identified as belonging to the same group of sexual victims as Ellen James (and the Ellen Jamesians) and the young rape victim in the park near the Garp family house. He is punished, and while this elicits *schadenfreude* in the reader, it also evokes pity. Similarly, the reader is worried for and resigned to the fates of Garp and Helen. Both have had illicit (and dishonest) affairs and both have heretofore emerged unpunished. Walt and Duncan, though, have done nothing wrong.

Garp has two prophetic dreams. In "The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky," Garp dreams of accidentally sending Duncan to his death via an unmarked door (226-7). In "Walt Catches a Cold," Garp is helpless to wake Walt (or himself) up from a nightmare in which the boys are headed into a bomb shelter (276-7). Irving has thus prepared his audience for the death

of one of the boys. While the audience might feel resignation due to Irving's dream warnings, this does not work to temper the feeling that the children have been wronged by the adults in some unspecified manner. It is the layered and simultaneous reaction to all of these characters that embodies the grotesque.

The conflict is not confined solely to the reader's response. F. Th. Vischer states that the grotesque, a fusion of heterogeneous elements," requires the "ridiculous and the comic" (qtd. in Kayser 102-3). Vischer "uses 'gay' in conjunction with 'madness,' thereby depriving the latter word of its inhuman and ominous quality" (103). Applied to Irving, grotesque humor serves as "a grim reminder that ghastly events need not occur in the dignified manner of classical tragedy" (Nelson 38-9). Irving does not treat the relatively somber themes of death and/or disfigurement in the expected way. The disintegration of the body, in which "part of the body that makes itself independent" (Kayser 125), becomes an opportunity for Irving to heighten the audience's emotional conflict. In *The World According to Garp*, the grotesque body is maimed and/or changed through amputation and accident. While these maimings could offer the reader relief from the hard-edged humor of the rest of the novel, they instead become sites of heightened conflict as in the case of Michael Milton's accidental castration.

This presentation of the tragic as laughable acts, for Mikhail Bakhtin, is life-affirming. In *Rabelais and His World*, he specifically cites Kayser's definition of "the grotesque... [that] all that was for us familiar and friendly suddenly becomes hostile," and asserts instead that "the grotesque... discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (Bakhtin 48). What can be described as alienation becomes, through Bakhtin's lens, reinterpretation. In a discussion of Irving and gender, this becomes vitally important. While the grotesque in Irving's work allows for conflict in response to shifting ideas of gender norms and

bodily boundaries, it can also be read as an affirmation. If, in Bakhtin, death is always tied to life, then the demise of traditional roles must give rise to something new. This can be seen in Bakhtin's recurring image of the "senile pregnant hags...[that] is a pregnant death, a death that gives birth" (Bakhtin 25). In the larger scheme, this rebirth is cosmic and unending. On a smaller scale, in Irving's novel, characters undergo catastrophic events and emerge from them reborn in some way.

Irving's grotesque also embraces the carnivalesque which, for Bakhtin, "belongs to the borderline between art and life" (Bakhtin 7). Irving's major instance of the carnivalesque in *Garp* occurs at the funeral of Jenny Fields where all gender norms and associated power structures are challenged. Paula Uruburu asserts that the American grotesque:

relies upon the pre-existence of rules and regulations which the writer or artist then distorts or overturns... [and] relies upon and continues to grow out of our country's lack of restrictions or limitations, its supposed tolerance of a variety of opinions and cultures which makes it difficult to distinguish the normal from the abnormal. (Uruburu 10)

Here is the distinction between Bakhtin's carnivalesque and Uruburu's: for Bakhtin carnivals are finite events that allow norms to be challenged, whereas Uruburu defines American society itself as carnivalesque.

It must be noted that Bakhtin's sense of the carnivalesque is inextricably rooted in the folk tales of Rabelais while Kayser's grotesque is drawn from a canonical view of European art through the ages. Irving, operating in America in the twentieth century, can and should be viewed in light of their analysis, but much is to be gained by examining his work in the specific context of the American grotesque. For this, it is useful to focus on the work of Uruburu. . In *The*

*Gruesome Doorway: An Analysis of the American Grotesque*, she asserts that there is a distinctly American grotesque which “seeks paradoxically to examine, mock and yet embrace both the imaginative and the realistic aspects of the American Dream... the disjunctive elements that have shaped [the] national character...” (Uruburu ix). This is particularly applicable to John Irving’s treatment of gender and gender relationships because his career as a novelist began in the throes of the feminist movement of the 1960s, a time period rife with “disjunctive elements.” Uruburu identifies America as prone to “cultural schizophrenia” due to the conflict between “its native pragmatism and romantic idealism” (Uruburu 2). Similar to Kayser, Uruburu asserts that “...dependence upon reality; [grotesque] characters move about in a world we accept as or acknowledge as our own... [it] successfully[s] portray the eruption of the abnormal in our everyday lives... terror rooted in real fears, not imagined ones” (Uruburu 1). As Thomson states, “the [grotesque] story is not situated in the realm of the fantastic, and the reader does not respond it that way... the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way” (8). The America that Irving (re)creates in *The World According to Garp* is a plausible one. Garp’s fears, Jenny’s fears and Helen’s fears are all rooted in fears the audience has: a destabilization in gender that changes the politics of sexuality, marriage and parenthood. The reader recognizes Irving’s world as his/her own because “the grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it’ i.e. that it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh prospective, which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic” (Clayborough qtd. in Thompson 17).

This alienating effect of the grotesque is used to great advantage by Irving because the America he writes from is already in a state of alienation. Shifting gender roles ensure that the

reader's sense of the traditional is already disturbed. The heretofore fixed definitions of woman and man have already been called into question by science and the feminist movement. Irving succeeds in doubly alienating the audience because he is able to simultaneously push them even further from the traditional norm of actual reality while at the same time he shifts the reality within his narrative by degrees until it becomes a believable absurdity. This is in line with Uruburu's assertion that writers of the grotesque "forc[e] their readers to see, perhaps for the first time, the separations and discontinuities in our culture of disassociation in the hopes that we will atone for our sins" (Uruburu 3). For the purpose of examining John Irving's fiction, particularly those texts written during the so-called sexual revolution, the American Dream must be expanded to include the ideals of sexual and personal freedom that America has (partially) embraced since the 1960s. In this way, special attention must be paid to "the grotesque tradition in its emphasis on carnality, orality and appetite" (Burlinson 292) with the conscious understanding that in Irving's, and Garp's world, these things intersect in what Jenny Fields terms lust.

The roots and identifying features of Irving's grotesque are found in the work of Kayser, Bakhtin and Uruburu. Kayser's emphasis on heterogeneous mixtures, Bakhtin's sense of degradation and inversion, and Uruburu's idea of cultural disjunction are all apparent in the novel. The overlap that occurs between the three theorists on the subject of alienation is vital to Irving's grotesque as well. Finally, the sense of boundaries - between bodies and the outside world and between traditionally delineated relationships and roles - is transgressed, as Bakhtin emphasized, and is in Irving, eroded.

Irving's novel is populated by traditionally grotesque characters. These characters embody the inversion of Bakhtin and the heterogeneity of Kayser. Irving, through Garp,

introduces the Bakhtinian idea of the mixing of the upper and lower stratum. For Bakhtin, “[d]ownward’ is earth, ‘upward’ is heaven... in their purely bodily aspect... the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, the buttocks... Degradation [in the Bakhtinian grotesque] means coming down to earth...” (Bakhtin 21). Degradation is not a soiling in the literal sense but a transgression of spiritual and physical or, put simply, “concern[ing] oneself with the lower stratum of the body” (21). Bakhtin also notes that “somersaults are topographical... they present an interplay, a substitution of the face by the buttocks” (397). It is noteworthy, then, that Garp’s short story includes a man who walks on his hands or, more specifically, whose first encounter with the protagonist’s family is one in which his hands were “where [his] feet should have been” (Irving 122). In true Bakhtinian fashion, though, the man’s inversion is a triumph: “But did you know that he can’t do it [walk] any other way?” the dream man asked suddenly. “Did you know his legs were useless? He has no shinbones. It is *wonderful* that he can walk on his hands! Otherwise he wouldn’t walk at all” (Irving 140). These characters serve, by way of exaggeration and excess, to make Garp’s world all the more real and, thus, further position Garp’s reality as theirs, cementing the alienation from their actual reality.

Even Garp’s novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, “a serious comedy about marriage, but a sexual farce” (Irving 184), is populated with grotesques: a stuttering man, a blind man, a woman whose arm is prone muscle spasms, a woman who “suffers unpredictable, unstoppable flatulence” (185). These characters make all the more believable the stuttering and never-complete Alice Fletcher (176), the stuttering and dog-breathed Tinch/Stench, the transsexuals, asexual, mutes and amputees of Garp’s, and now Irving’s audience’s, reality. The stutterers are of particular interest if they are read in light of Kayser’s citation of Hegel’s definition of the



grotesque as “[t]he unnatural ‘multiplication of one and the same function, the presence of numerous arms, heads, etc.’” (Kayser 102). The many stops and starts of Mr. Tinch, Alice Fletcher and the stuttering husband of *Cuckold* are grotesque in that the sounds and words are repetitions, phonemes of the same function. They serve to clutter the characters’ speech without adding anything useful. So overwhelming is the effect of the stutter on the listener/reader that the stutter becomes the identity of the stutterer; the character is confused with the sound he or she makes. This repetition of sounds and of actions is also used by Irving as he repeats themes, motifs and characters throughout this novel and through the excerpts of Garp’s work..

As noted earlier, the Bakhtinian grotesque divides the body into the upper and the lower stratum. The lower stratum is linked closely with regeneration and so, too, is the entirety of the grotesque for Bakhtin. The idea of universality is embedded in this grotesque and the images that Bakhtin examine highlight this idea. The “senile pregnant hag’s... is a pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (Bakhtin 25). Death and birth are inextricably linked because “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). While for Bakhtin there is a close relationship between the body and the outside world, this mixing of life and death can be read as another manifestation of Kayser’s heterogeneous elements. Bakhtin, however, places the emphasis on humankind as a part of a universal story and not on distinctly separate individuals. This idea of physical transgression of limits forces close examination of the grotesque body and reveals that “[t]he stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world... emphasis is on the apertures or convexities... the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the pot-belly, the nose” (Bakhtin 26). This image of pregnant death, of a death that gives birth, can be applied to both T.S. Garp’s birth and his death.

Garp's father, Technical Sergeant Garp, is himself regressing when he fathers Garp. After his "thirty-fifth flight over France," he "received some cuts and slashes a lot like a prefrontal lobotomy" (Irving 19; 20). This "rather careless surgery" leaves him in a state which the narrator likens to "a monkey in a zoo" or "a smart parrot or a crow" and later a "shaved owl" or a "cat" (20; 19; 21; 22). Garp "[d]aily seemed to grow younger" and in his regressed state he became a mixture of heterogeneous elements that define the grotesque genre (23). He is severely injured – the injury will lead to his death – but he manages to masturbate and ejaculate before he ever receives medical attention (20). Jenny Fields realized that "she was losing him" because he slept more and more like a baby: "knead[ing] the air with his wriggling fists, his lips puckering, his cheeks sucking, his eyelids trembling" (Irving 23). In the end, "he [would be] attached to a kind of umbilical cord (26). Technical Sergeant Garp is the male pregnant hag; he is also the fertile and dying infant.

William Nelson notes in "The Comic Grotesque in Recent Fiction" that the "details of [T.S. Garp's] birth and death make a grotesque comparison with those of Jesus. His conception is the only sexual experience of his mother, Jenny Fields, a nurse who is uninterested in either sex or marriage but who wants a child. The time is 1942. Jenny chooses for her child's father Technical Sergeant Garp, whose shrapnel wounds to the head have left him a vegetable..." (Nelson 37). Nelson's vernacular word choice is telling; the union of Jenny Fields and Technical Sergeant Garp is a union of heterogeneous elements: human and vegetable, the living and the dying.

T.S. Garp's final moments present the reader with another such mix of life and death that begins years before the second, and this time successful, assassination attempt. That Irving draws a comparison between the wrestling room where Garp would eventually die and wombs in

general is obvious. From the start, the room is presented as fertile ground; it “beckoned Jenny in the way a tropical greenhouse” might beckon one (Irving 62). When Jenny steps inside, she steps onto the “soft fleshy feel[ing]” mats that cover the room with their “warm and yielding” texture (63). Jenny imagined that the “red wrestling room, huge but contained, padded against pain” might protect her son; it would not (69). As Lounsberry notes, “Garp’s own early death comes, ironically, in the womblike wrestling room, the place Jenny chose as the safest of all places” (33).

Garp’s killer, Pooh Percy, is wearing a “Jenny Fields Original [nursing uniform] with the characteristic red heart sewn over the breast” (Irving 473). This wardrobe choice “emphasiz[es] the ambivalence of grotesque images [which are] characterized by representations of the two-in-one, uniting top and bottom, face and backside, fat and thin, birth and death” (Burlinson 292). The Jenny Fields Original “bear[s] no relationship to real nursing and become[s], on Pooh Percy, the uniform of death (Lounsberry 31). The uniform specifically harkens back to Hepburn’s assertion of bodies as “antagonistic doubles, such as detectives and criminals, jailers and prisoners, *talkers and listeners*, doctors and patients; in this instance “[t]hese identities blur” and the nurses become killers (Hepburn 134, emphasis added). This antagonistic relationship can be applied to “the women of the Ellen Jamesian Society do violence to themselves in extremist devotion to an anti-violence cause” (Lounsberry 31). These women degrade themselves in the Bakhtinian sense: they hurt what they seek to protect. That Pooh Percy, a recently untongued Ellen Jamesian, should deliver the death blow in a nurse’s uniform, in the womb-like wrestling room and later, at age fifty-four, give birth, reinforces her identity as a grotesque, true, but it also reiterates the acts of alienation and degradation so often present in the grotesque.

Kayser cites E.T.A. Hoffman's three categories of "grotesque figures:" 1) "characters whose appearance and movements are grotesque," 2) "the eccentric artists, most of whom are distinguished by their odd outward appearance, strange and uncontrolled facial expressions, and eccentric movements," 3) 'demonic' characters whose appearance and behavior are grotesque... (Kayser 105-6). In this use demonic means that the "mere presence [of these characters] usually spells death and destruction" (106). Pooh Percy, with her unfortunate excremental nickname, is established by Irving as grotesque early in the novel; at fourteen, she still wears diapers. She is, as her sister Cushie put it, "*housebroken* and all that [but she] just likes to *wear* diapers" (90). The distinction her sister makes between wearing and the implied using of diapers makes Pooh's choice sadder and simultaneously more uncomfortably funny. When Irving initially describes the Percy clan, it is enmeshed in the description of their dog Bonkers, who bites "off [Garp's] left earlobe – and part of the rest of [his] ear, as well" (50). Pooh is likewise there when, years later, Garp "bit Bonkers' ear in memory of his own missing flesh" (92). Pooh is the catalyst for the mayhem and violence directed at Garp during his mother's carnivalesque funeral (411). Pooh Percy is a demonic character who brings violence into Garp's life but she is also, like the Ellen Jamesians, grotesque because of her singular vision and her pursuit of it. Uruburu's examination of the struggle to achieve the American Dream leads her to conclude that there are "essentially two results when the practical drive for material success contends with the more optimistic and idealistic side to the pursuit of the American Dream – [1] those who try to realize their particular dream may run the risk of becoming grotesques who will sacrifice anyone around them to achieve it, or [2] they run the risk of becoming the unwitting victims of the essential grotesqueness of others" (Uruburu 20). This applies to both Garp and Pooh Percy.

Garp, through his “good and ruthless imitat[ion] of human behavior,” sacrificed the privacy of his family and friends in order to pursue his singular dream of being a writer (Irving 185). Simultaneously, Pooh becomes distorted by her obsessive interpretation of feminism. She, too, is willing to sacrifice anything (her tongue) or anyone (Garp) to achieve the ideal. This can be read as the fear of feminism’s rise in popularity or the rejection of the singularly defined role of “woman” as advocated by authors such as Betty Friedman. Reading Pooh Percy as feminism taken to the extreme speaks to fear of and destabilization caused by the feminist movement. Irving does, however, offer up a more balanced view of the possible reinterpretations of woman/wife/mother through Helen Holm and, of course, this is counterbalanced by Garp as man/husband/father. The reversal of roles that Helen and Garp represent is foreshadowed by the parenting of Ernie Holm and Jenny Fields.

Beyond her challenges to gender roles and the traditional family structure, Jenny Fields is a grotesque character in terms of being a heterogeneous mixture of values and traits. It is impossible to discuss the character independent of her sexuality. As has been established, she is a nurse who rapes her invalid patient; she is predator and nurturer. Even in death, her legacy is contentious. Her funeral becomes, for Garp, a man forbidden from attending, an exercise in carnivalesque gender confusion. Carnivals, according to Bakhtin, “sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it” by “suspension of all the hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (9, 10). Within the carnival, norms are allowed to be broken. By acting as a release valve for society, carnivals allow for societal norms to remain in place by relegating any acts which might threaten them to the realm of the comic or absurd. Such an environment allows for degradation or, as Bakhtin defines it, the “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body...” (19). This idea is

closely tied to his “material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” which he terms “grotesque realism” (18) and which by their mechanisms – mastication, swallowing, digestion and penetration – emphasize the bodies’ innate transgression of boundaries.

Jenny Fields’ funeral is exclusively “for *women*” (Irving 403, emphasis in original). As the novel is concerned with the politics of gender and the violence caused by the interactions of men and women, and as it outlines a patriarchal culture which women chafe within, an exclusively female space is a suspension of the hierarchy – a reversal of the norm. At the funeral, there are no male voices; Garp is, without injury as a cause, forced to communicate through written words on slips of paper. The words themselves are not even his: “Hi! I’m an Ellen Jamesian” (411). This repetition of words with little or no real meaning mirrors the stutterers of Irving/Garp throughout the novel and serves to emphasize the grotesque nature of the event. Garp is dressed in a “cheap turquoise jumpsuit” that has “a gold zipper that ran from [his] crotch to [his] throat” (408). If this zipper mirrors in some way an autopsy incision, it is reflected in Garp’s feeling “that *he* was an open casket” (408, emphasis in original). Garp feels as though his body has no real boundaries. This feeling is justified when Garp, after being figuratively unmasked as a man, faces a gauntlet of women who try to tear him apart. The mob is at once human and animal. Garp’s feminine disguise is dissected and dismembered: His “falsies [were] punched,” he was “hit in the balls,” they tried to “rip his wig out of his hands” and, most tellingly, they grabbed at “his tiny purse” (Irving 413). While the purse may seem like the least personal of part of the quartering it is actually the most symbolic.

In the first chapter of *The World According to Garp*, Jenny Fields keeps a chipped scalpel, an obvious phallic symbol, in her purse. Before she learns how to control it with “an old

thermometer container that slipped over the head of the scalpel, capping it like a fountain pen” or a condom, it “had slashed up the little silk pockets of her purse” (9). In light of the 1960s and 1970s feminist appraisal of patriarchy’s oppression of women through the cultural institutions of motherhood and marriage, both of which historically tethered women to the home, the female attack on Garp’s “purse” is both a reenactment and a reversal of this oppression. Further, the relationship between the condom-like thermometer cap and the scalpel which damages Jenny Field’s purse is especially important in light of Pooh Percy’s accusation, that “[Garp] fucked my sister to *death*!” (412, emphasis in original). During an almost intimate encounter, Cushie Percy told Garp that she didn’t want to have his babies and thus would not have sex with him in the absence of a condom (84). Eventually, Cushie did have productive sex, which led to her death in childbirth (247).

Yet another instance in the text of a purse being taken away occurs when Charlotte, a Viennese prostitute with whom Garp has a personal and professional relationship, tells Garp, “They cut my purse out” (133). He learns later that “a purse was a prostitute’s word for her vagina” (133). Charlotte’s sexual agency, though legal in Vienna, is still not respectable, just as Cushie Percy’s tryst with Garp casts her as a bad girl. For both women, it is their morally unsanctioned behavior, specifically their refusal to keep strict moral, social and sexual boundaries in place, that leads to their early deaths. Garp’s participation as lover to and mourner of them both reflects a masculinity torn between traditional conquest of the female body and a more modern sympathy for these sexual suspects.

Taken as a whole, Irving’s symbolic use of the purse allow Garp’s dismemberment at his mother’s funeral as a symbolic rape. Garp enters into a land of women and his male privilege is revoked; his body can and is used as a locus of anger just like Ellen James, the Ellen Jamesians

and the young girl raped in the park. Irving's dismembering of the body is a near constant theme of the novel. Most plentiful are the instances of obvious amputation: Michael Milton's penis, the tongues of the Ellen Jamesians, Duncan Garp's eye and many more. While a discussion of these is necessary to understand Irving's use of the grotesque, it is just as necessary to discuss the less overt instances of dismemberment and those instances when morality and amputation intersect.

In *The World According to Garp* emphasis is placed on the mouth and its relationship to the outside world. In the most overt instances, the female mouth is a site of male gratification through oral sex or the site of political amputation in protest of a male-dominated society.

Uruburu's assertion, in part similar to Bakhtin's, attests to the idea of the body as a vital part of the grotesque, but she diverges by emphasizing not the body's apertures but its ability to become fractured: "...often within a grotesque work, actual dissections or dismemberments of the body occur, or bits and pieces of it are lost, destroyed, take on a strange life of their own, etc. which, completes the process of dehumanization begun by the writers' deliberate distortion of the human form and raises the question as to what defines wholeness and humanity" (Uruburu 12).

Irving's treatment of several of his female characters marks an intersection between Bakhtin and Uruburu. In general, "the female body [...] most obviously transgresses bodily limits and boundaries by reproducing itself" (Burlinson 293). However, even in acts that are "nonreproductive" (Irving 85), the female body invites transgression by its very existence or, as Bakhtin might note, by the existent of apertures by which society defines it.

Cushie Percy doesn't "want babies" so her sexual encounter with Garp becomes another Bakhtinian cartwheel of sorts when Garp fails to bring condoms. Cushie "took him suddenly into



her warm mouth” enacting a literal vagina dentata (Irving 85) in which the upper and lower strata are reversed.

As Burlinson notes, “gender difference in approach to food is not recognized by Bakhtin, who appears oblivious to the gendered nature of his own discussion of the body. His assertion of an unequivocally enjoyable gustatory experience testifies to this blindness: ‘Man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and world are erased, to man’s advantage” (Burlinson 306). While Bakhtin is referring to food, this transgression of boundaries through the oral is easily applied to fellatio as well. However, as Irving points out through his narration, it is a “nonreciprocal” act (85). Cushie Percy becomes, simply, a mouth.

The time period during which Irving wrote must not be ignored. The Bakhtinian grotesque celebrates the act of eating but the era in which Irving wrote saw the rise of female body ideals such as the supermodel Twiggy. Eating, then, must be interpreted as a defeat for the female body. Burlinson continues on to say that “[c]onsumption... is prohibited for good girls, for it signifies not only appetite and desire but the transgression of the self-contained protected body which is the only feminine defense against a hostile world” (Burlinson 305) or, in simpler terms, “To eat can have terrible consequences for a nice young lady” (Burlinson 305). Irving goes to great pains to distinguish Cushie Percy from nice young ladies:

The Dibbs School was the fifth prep school for girls that Cushie Percy had attended; she’s started out at Talbot, in Helen’s class, but Cushie had disciplinary problems and she’d been asked to leave. The disciplinary problems had repeated themselves at three other schools. Among the boys at Steering [Academy], the Dibbs

School was famous – and popular – for its girls with disciplinary problems. (Irving 79)

Cushie, a bad girl with bad appetites, takes Garp into her mouth and is ultimately punished for her lust; she dies in childbirth (247). The vagina dentata motif is repeated in the exchange between Helen Holm and Michael Milton, the student she has had an affair with. The oral sex is Helen's fantasy; "sometimes she imagined taking [Michael] into her mouth while they drove across town in the big car" (280). She doesn't act on this fantasy, however, because the two lovers are in a moving car and she knew it "would not be safe" (280). It is Michael's assertion, while they are parked in Helen's driveway, that "the car isn't even moving [so t]here can't be any accidents now" coupled with his use of force that causes Helen to finally take him into her mouth in the front seat of his Buick (301). The result is the accidental amputation of "three quarters of Michael Milton's penis" (307). Michael seeks to take by force what in traditional terms already belongs to another man: Helen.

This amputation is only one of many in the novel. The two other most significant amputations are Robert/a Muldoon's sex change operation and the forcible attempt at silencing rape victim, Ellen James, by cutting out her tongue. Roberta's operation calls into question the (in)stability of gender while Ellen's rapist's mutilation of her badly fails at silencing her and, in fact, acts to spur a contingent of women to speak out – using silence – about gender disparity.

Roberta's election to have her penis removed overtly acknowledges the "inversions, reversals and crossings-over [that] render stable categories distinctly wobbly" (Burlinson 294). However, so does Michael Milton's accident. Both Roberta Muldoon and Michael Milton have their penis amputated; Michael accidentally and Roberta in a "successful sex-change operation" (Irving 187). Neither of these amputations is final: Michael, [d]ue to an infection...had to have

the remaining quarter of his penis removed” (318) and Roberta, in her words, “had to use this horrible dilator all the time so that [her] vagina wouldn’t close; [she] felt like a *machine*” (313, emphasis in original).

While Roberta feels like a mixture of woman and machine, she is actually a mix of male and female. Similarly, earlier in the novel, Margie Tallworth, a student of Helen’s and Michael’s lover before Helen, assumes even before it is true “that they [Helen and Michael] were fucking” because Margie “did not believe that there was another kind of relationship one could have with Michael Milton” (Irving 283). After the accident, Michael is a lover who is now physically incapable of the act of lovemaking. That Irving uses these two extreme characters is not haphazard; Roberta is a former professional football player, the epitome of masculinity, and Michael is a self-appointed Don Juan. Both are caricatures of masculinity in their original forms. After the grotesque world acts upon their bodies – devouring Michael’s penis by way of a mouth/vagina dentata and replacing Roberta’s penis with an actual vagina – the question becomes, what are they now?

Allan Hepburn, in “Monstrous Bodies: Freakish Forms and Strange Conceptions” in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, explores the idea of the grotesque monster: “Monstrosity consists in a crossing of borders that separate one identity from another, where male becomes female, or human becomes animal. As Elizabeth Grosz claims, the human monster jeopardizes categories: ‘freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classification’” (Hepburn 136). Roberta Muldoon and Michael Milton are, then, monstrous. Hepburn also notes that “The term “monster” is etymologically related to the Latin noun *monstrum* (a sign, wonder, or warning) and the Latin verb *monstrare* (to display or show). A monster must be seen to be feared, though the monster

often remains invisible, grasped only by remnants – a footprint, a bone, a blurry photograph – or by non-verbal noise...” (Hepburn 136-7). In the final chapter of the novel, Michael Milton visits Duncan Garp under the pretense of writing a “critical biography” and Duncan is left with the impression “that the man was missing something, though Duncan couldn’t have known that Michael Milton was missing his penis” (Irving 501). Michael, as grotesque monster, is sensed by Duncan just as Garp’s late night question to Roberta, “Why didn’t you beat the shit out of [your ex-lover]?” (249), hints at the lingering sense of maleness in Roberta inasmuch as maleness is often linked with violence in the novel.

The Ellen Jamesians, and later Duncan Garp, serve to forefront “[t]he Cartesian formulation of the mind’s radical independence from the body [and] leads to the conception of the body as something to be amputated, or, at the least, dismissed. Descartes writes, “if a foot, or an arm, or any other part is separated from my body, it is certain that, on that account, nothing has been taken away from my mind” (Hepburn 141). While this certainly applies to Roberta, as Irving explicitly states that “Roberta’s *knowledge* of football had not decreased one drop since the estrogen” (Irving 187, emphasis in original), it also applies to both Ellen James and the society of women who emulate her wounds. Ellen James’ story is simple, as told by Jenny Fields:

“Two men raped her when she was eleven years old... Then they cut her tongue off so she couldn’t tell anyone who they were or what they looked like. They were so stupid that they didn’t know an eleven-year-old could *write*. Ellen James wrote a very careful description of the men and they were caught, and they were tried and convicted” (Irving 157)

Certainly the disarticulation of Ellen's tongue does not in any way impair her cognitive functioning. Her rape can be read as an inversion also: in the act of rape the men transgress the boundaries of her body by insertion and then act to fracture her body by amputation. They transgress both the upper and lower strata in their attack. The Ellen Jamesians, too, though mute are not without figurative voice. Their act of "untonguing" made literal their feeling that though "their tongues were gone [, that i]n a world of men, they felt as if they had been shut up forever (445). Here, the tension of the grotesque is apparent a "sincere" gesture that is also "stupid" (158).

Garp gives voice to the incredulity this act of self-mutilation evokes when he asks, "The next time there's a rape, suppose I cut my *prick* off and wear it around my neck. Would you respect that, too?" (Irving 158, emphasis in original). Garp's question is admittedly sarcastic but his suggestion is on par with the absurdity of the women's actions. Irving calls into question Garp's moral superiority on several occasions; after his sexual liaison with the baby sitter, Cindy, she is "unable to speak to him" (174, emphasis in original). Male lust, whether forceful or not, has a silencing effect on the women in the novel. This sentiment is verbalized by Helen's later statement to Garp: "by saying nothing, you know you'll get what you want..." (446). Male silence, then, is different from female silence and is, in most cases, a choice and not a political statement.

This, of course, is not always the case in *The World According to Garp*. The car accident which amputated Michael Milton's penis also "gouged out" Duncan's right eye, broke three of his fingers, broke Helen's right collarbone, broke Garp's jaw and "mangle[d] his tongue" (Irving 306-8). Garp is degraded in that he is placed in the position of the women he loathes: All his messages "were written ones" (308). This reversal is, according to Hepburn, characteristic of the

grotesque, in which “bodies are split into antagonistic doubles, such as detective and criminals, jailers and prisoners, *talkers and listeners*, doctors and patients [and then t]hese identities blur: listeners become talkers; doctors need medical attention” (Hepburn 134, emphasis added). Irving notes that he wanted to “to push this idea [how difficult it is to express oneself] to a kind of extreme: here we have the writer, who deals with language in order to express himself, placed in a situation in which he can’t make himself understood because the words he has at his disposal, on those slips of paper, are ludicrously inadequate to communicate his feelings” (McCaffery 16).

Garp, a male whose livelihood depends on his communication of his ideas to others, is forced to silence – a fate usually reserved for female victims. Taken chronologically, this is a stutter, a start and stop, of what his experience at his mother’s funeral will be. Taken politically, Garp is the victim of female sexuality. Helen’s unsanctioned extramarital affair renders him, if not impotent physically (Irving 323), then impotent figuratively. If, in a grotesque world, “[m]onstrous desires... manifest themselves outwardly as acts of destruction and mutilation,” then “[s]carred bodies proclaim traumas that have been survived” (Hepburn 135-6). Garp recovers the use of his tongue and uses the trauma to write his third novel; “the thought of being an artist, a painter and a photographer, first occurred” to Duncan Garp during his recovery after losing his eye (Irving 308). Here Irving reinforces a common stereotype: men are made stronger, sharper by trials whereas women, unequipped to deal with an unkind world, remain victims permanently. Women are always negatively defined by their bodies and the scars which they bear, whether those scars are physical or otherwise.

This remains true throughout the novel. Jenny Fields, for instance, is largely asexual but her aversion to sex and marriage render her a constant victim of misinterpretation. Jenny’s mother assumes her daughter’s disavowal of the traditional wife/mother role must mean she

occupies the role of whore. Her gifting of the euphemistic “hot-water bottle[s]” attests to the indoctrinated belief in the dirtiness of the female body (Irving 12). Jenny Field’s observation that a “douche bag was a gentler, more commodious version of the Valentine irrigator,” the device used to treat syphilis in men (12), reinforces the female identity as fractured. On the one hand, woman is wholesome and pure if engaged in the act of mothering inside the confines of a marriage, and, on the other hand, in need of cleaning if she is not.

Jenny Fields “ma[de] no attempt to invent a mythology for Garp’s father – to make up a marriage story for herself, to legitimize her son” (Irving 29). Jenny is ostracized because of her out-of-wedlock son but most damning is her unapologetic attitude; as a woman she should be sorry for what she has done. Ernie Holm, as single father, is Jenny’s opposite in almost every way. He creates a mythology for his daughter: “ ‘One day... you might see a pretty nurse, sort of looking like she doesn’t know where she *is* anymore, and she might look at you like she doesn’t know who *you* are either...and that will be your mom” (65-66). Both Ernie’s and Jenny’s parenting situations give voice to the fear that women might have wants, desires and talents outside of the domestic sphere, which might mean the end of the traditional stable family. In Ernie’s case, female boredom or “the strain of being a full-time mother and an ex-nurse” causes his wife to leave him and their daughter (65). The mixing of the masculine desire to work with the feminine role of motherhood creates monsters. Mrs. Holm abandons the female role completely while Jenny seeks to embody them both. These women reflect a destabilized femininity and the accompanying anxiety over the maternal role in Irving’s day. Ernie, too, rejects the traditional patriarchal view of his daughter’s body; regarding Helen’s marriage to Garp he says, “ ‘I don’t know why they can’t just *live* together... [a]nd if that works out, *then* let them get married; then let them have a baby” (151). Ernie, presumably having learned from his

own failed marriage, acknowledges Helen's autonomy and yet still sees marriage and motherhood as the ultimate goal.

The products of these two fractured families, Garp and Helm Holm ne Garp, are, according to the Hepburn definition cited earlier, monsters. Their destabilized genders emphasize their interstitial location; neither is traditionally gendered. Helen "ma[de the] money for them" both and later "agreed to have a child only if Garp would take care of it" (Irving 150; 154). Garp is essentially a housewife who cooks and cleans and can only pursue his work "between feeds and naps and changes of diapers" (154).

The Garps challenge traditional notions of parenthood but also traditional notions of fidelity within marriage. Both have clandestine affairs: Garp has an appetite for babysitters and Helen has Michael Milton. However, as a couple they swap partners with Harrison and Alice Fletcher and, notably, the idea to do so is Helen's (Irving 179). This choice acts to reinforce Helen's sexual agency, a redefining of marriage in which female fidelity is more highly valued than male fidelity, but this act also creates another grotesque body: the melding of the two couples into one four-headed body. The Judeo-Christian tradition describes marriage as an act in which the man and woman become "no longer two, but one flesh" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Matt. 19.6; Gen. 2.24). Helen and Garp, and Harrison and Fletcher, already constitute a grotesque union of masculine and feminine, male and female by virtue of their marital unions. However, this melding of flesh is also linked to the sex act: "whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her (1 Corinthians 6.16). By engaging in partner-swapping, the couples simultaneously create a four-headed monster and/or two (more) fractured bodies in the text.



Irving's treatment of sex in the novel betrays an understanding of the violence and risk associated with femininity and highlights both male guilt and male culpability. Garp enacts the degradation produced by the collision of male desire/traditional chivalry and guilt/blame. Garp, while on his daily jog, stumbles across a young girl who has just been raped (Irving 164). In his frenzied and well-meaning attempt to find her attacker, he essentially sexually assaults an older man by "unbuckl[ing] the man's belt and t[earing] open the man's pants and yank[ing] the man's undershorts straight down to the man's ankles" and then taking "a deep sniff" of the man's genitalia looking for the scent of intercourse (165). This scene confuses the upper/lower strata and the hero/perpetrator by placing Garps's face on a level with the man's genitals. The man, not truly a victim in the same way as the young raped girl, is convinced of Garp's guilt. Similarly, the cultural construct of marriage and femininity assumes that its institutions are for the protection of the females confined within them; the political movements of Irving's times pointed out just how misguided these assumption were as it was the institutions in place which served to dehumanize women. Notably, Garp is again confused with a perpetrator of sexual crimes after he comes to the aid of Mrs. Ralph (228-45).

The repetition of this confusion highlights the guilt borne by feminist men in Irving's age. This guilt is articulated when, in a convenience store, Garp encounters the elderly man he accosted while trying to apprehend the rapist. The man, still convinced of Garp's guilt, states "A pervert on the loose.... Looking for innocence to violate and defile" (170). Garp, credited with capturing the girl's true attacker, still felt that rape "made men feel guilty by association" (169; 172). He is a fusion of heroics and the guilt of male privilege.

It is this guilt or, at the very least, an examination of human relationships that Irving (and Garp) examine through fiction. That the main character of the novel is himself a novelist is

especially apropos because so much of the grotesque depends on the reader's relationship and response to the text. It is useful to return to Hegel's definition of the grotesque as "[e]xcess and distortion... [and t]he unnatural multiplication of one and the same function..." (Kayser 102) when examining the structure of both Irving and Garp's work.

Debra Shostak's article "Plot as Repetition: John Irving's Narrative Experiments" explores Irving use of repeated elements, specifically motifs and plots. While Shostak's main concern is the intricacies of plot within Irving's oeuvre, her work makes evident how Irving's text itself is a grotesque with an "unnatural multiplication" of events by way of repetition. Irving himself has labeled these repetitions "'refrains' or 'little litanic devices'" and includes "tag lines and key phrases such as 'in the world according to Garp we are all'" (51). This phrase, in addition to being the book's title, is repeated often throughout the novel by the omniscient narrator and forms part of the title of Garp's last finished novel: *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Shostak further notes that these "verbal repetitions are frequently supplemented by obsessive motifs – metaphors and characters calling attention to themselves *as* motifs" and include "bears," "wrestling," "Vienna," "womb symbols," and "amputations and other forms of maiming" (51). This is succinctly put by Barbara Lounsberry, who delivers up a body count: *The World According to Garp* "contains, to be precise, three rapes, two assassinations, two accidental deaths, the loss of an eye, the loss of two ears, the loss of an arm, the loss of a penis, and a whole society of women with amputated tongues" (30).

Lounsberry cites only those acts of violence, largely ignoring the plot repetitions that lead up to the acts of violence themselves. These instances, such as "when lisping Alice Fletcher deliberately 'crashed' her shopping cart into Garp's at the supermarket, jarring little Walt... portrays Walt jeopardized by adult sexuality even before his driveway demise" (Lounsberry 30).

Garp's short story "The Grillparzer Pension," also acts as a precursor – or, seen another way, as a stutter, an almost act of violence that will come to complete fruition later in the form of repetition – to Walt's death. The dream told to the family "points toward the future death of Johanna's husband, who dies of a respiratory infection," but it also "foretells the fate of [Garp's] as yet unborn son, Walt, who is suffering from a respiratory infection when he is killed" (Shostak 58). Another instance of this is the parallel between Jenny Fields' first venture into the wrestling room (Irving 66) and Garp's last moments alive, spent in the wrestling room (473). In both instances, there is mistaken identity: Helen Holm's assumption that this was her biological mother and Garp's assumption that his assassin was "the kindly nurse Dotty" (473). There exist within the novel many more instances of repetition that fit this pattern.

Shostak believes that "there are two possible reactions to narrative repetitions. The first... is to experience the uncanny; that is, one is unsettled because repetition suggests that events fall into some pattern rather than being chaotic and contingent. The second... is to displace the experience so as to see repetitions as contrived, coincidental, corny" (52). Here, Shostak speaks to the reader response vital to the grotesque: the reader is conflicted about how to respond or else responds in both ways simultaneously, creating a tension between the "uncanny" and the "corny."

Irving tests this relationship between the audience and the novel by repeatedly using text within the text. Kayser notes that the grotesque can be found in the "motif by means of which the Elizabethan playw<sup>r</sup>ights and the Romantics sought to confuse the spectators' sense of reality: the play within a play" because "so much weight is attached to the motif that the audience is on the brink of losing its foothold on reality" (Kayser 134, 137). This, too, can be categorized as alienation; the audience is still an audience but by becoming the audience to the play within the

play, they shift and their world is no longer a real world. They become of the play. Irving's audience becomes Garp's audience, and, in smaller doses, the audience of Jenny Fields, Ellen James, the Ellen Jamesians, Jenny Garp and arguably Donald Whitcomb.

Here the threat associated with the grotesque is emphasized: the world which the reader inhabits is a dangerous one. Kayser notes that "[i]n the genuine grotesque the spectator becomes directly involved at some point where a specific meaning is attached to the events" as opposed to humor in which "a certain distance is maintained throughout and, with it, a feeling of security and indifference" (118). The audience is a crucial part of the grotesque; the audience must feel as though it is their world that harbors this absurdity. By positioning the audience to occupy several spaces at once, Irving confuses its true relation to the text. This idea is explicitly stated in the first chapter of Garp's *The World According to Bensenhaver* in an exchange between deputy and a bystander:

"You see a lot of this, huh?" the driver asked. "You know: rape and murder."

"Enough," the deputy said with self-conscious solemnity. He had never seen a rape or murder before, and he realized that even now he had not actually seen it through his own eyes as much as he'd been treated to the experience through the eyes of Arden Bensenhaver. He had seen rape and murder according to Bensenhaver, he thought. The deputy felt very confused; he sought some point of view all his own. (Irving 360)

Irving's audience is treated to the world according to his characters and it is a purposefully disorienting experience.

"[T]he way the text presents itself for consumption," to borrow a phrase from Kathryn Burlinson (296), is in very small bites. Irving's text is interrupted by these literary eruptions from

characters. In this way, too, *The World According to Garp* presents itself as a grotesque body by “transgress[ing] its own limits” (26). This transgression is evident in the presentation of “The Pension Grillparzer” (Irving 113). Up until this point the textual intrusions have been minimal: a billboard (5), a line quoted from Jenny Fields (26) or from Garp (7;8;9;) or a letter from Helen Holm (75), but with “The Pension Grillparzer”, the text within text takes over the narrative for a total of twenty-two pages. The story and the publishing choice to switch fonts for this, and all of Garp’s writing, acts to reduce the distance between Garp’s audience and Irving’s audience until the two are blurred; it also acts to position Garp as being as “real” as Irving.

Irving adds to this confusion by using Garp as a double but disavowing their similarities. After his novel, *Procrastination*, is published the omniscient narrator remarks that “[i]t was, of course, never a popular book, and it hardly made T.S. Garp into a brand name” or “‘the household product’ - as he called her - that his mother had become. But it was not that kind of book; he was not that kind of writer, and never would be” (Irving 160-1). After Garp’s second novel is published, “more nonsense was compiled concerning the novel’s ‘thesis’” and the novel “undersold [his previous novel] by a few thousand copies” (Irving 184). Viewed alongside Irving’s statement in a 1982 interview with Larry McCaffery that his literary reputation could be summed up as follows: “John Irving can be counted on for some serious critical reviews and diminishing sales. He a sort of arty-farty writer who’s going to be read by other writers and by people at universities, but he’s too hard to understand for people in the mainstream” (9), the confusion rooted in Garp as doppelganger becomes obvious. His follow-up statement, that he is “not a sociological writer” and that he is “the beneficiary of a different misunderstanding: that Garp is somehow a piece of relevancy” (10) further cements this idea because. This is almost the exact statement Jenny Fields says to her son: “[I]t appears you are going to be the beneficiary of

one of the many popular misunderstandings of our times” (Irving 392). The overlap of Irving and Garp creates a two-headed monster of an author who exists in the alienated reality of the novel and in the consumable reality of magazines.

The grotesquerie of boundary transgression through textual creation was a very relevant issue during Irving’s early writing career. Just as he sought to confuse the boundary between the readers’ perception of his writing and Garp’s writing and thereby write his doppelganger into existence, so too did other writers of the time seek to create more than text with their work. Betty Friedman’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) are only three of the many texts produced by the second-wave of American feminists. These and the multitudinous other texts of the academic and political movement sought to alienate the reader from their sense of normalcy by 1) identifying the underlying dangers and menace of what had heretofore been considered benign and/or remained unquestioned, and 2) encouraging the slow but radical change in gender relations that history has borne witness to. The novel, then, creates and reflects the dichotomous nature of gender relations at the time; it presents the traditional in the form of the Percy and Fields families next to their non-traditional foils, Jenny Fields and her young son and the Garp family.

Michael Priestley states that “*The World According to Garp* is peopled by an extraordinary cast of characters: rapists, child molesters, transsexuals, Ellen Jamesians, assassins [and] a slew of people without parents,” but these characters display an “essential humanness” (91; 94). They are absurd but their absurdity is not so far removed from our own; their traumas are plausible and their scars familiar. Most importantly, their anxieties – over gender, parenthood, marriage – are the fears of an evolving 1960s America. These fears are given depth through Irving’s presentation of them in concrete bodily form. Gender destabilization becomes

Roberta Muldoon. The radical feminists become the tongueless and hulking bodies of the Ellen Jamesians. The hope that the new idea(l)s can be embodied within familial institutions becomes the lasting love of the unconventional T.S. and Helen Garp. These bodies, both literal and symbolic, are a mixture of male and female, old and new.

Irving further uses the text-within-a-text approach to render a reality that forces his audience off balance and confuses the identity of the author. By including so much of Garp's fiction, which includes its own "[e]xaggeration and distortion," Irving's exaggerated and distorted and grotesque characters seem almost commonplace by comparison. The triumphs and misfortunes that the characters live can then be seen as a "crazy game of chance... [a] whirling wheel of crazy," which is exactly what life is (Rodolphe Töpffer qtd. in Kayser 113). This act of alienation is, in fact, life affirming. If Garp's reality is absurd and unrealistic, Irving's is palatable, if strange and shifting.

Once inside the reality of the novel Irving uses those characters and moments that inspire the most emotionally conflicted responses – Jenny Fields, T.S. Garp, the Garp family car accident, the feminist funeral – to point out the monstrous elements of American culture at the time. Undeniably, this book addresses the women's liberation movement, but it does so in a way that is hyperbolic and draws attention to its most absurd and comic elements. The Ellen Jamesians are the voicelessness of women in American personified; this is tragic. They have cut out their own tongues; this is ridiculous to the point of hysterical. Jenny Garp is an asexual feminist concerned with and surrounded by victimized women and yet she rapes Technical Sergeant Garp in order to conceive. Garp is largely guided by lust in early life but is placed in positions where he catches a rapist, befriends a famous rape victim and is hated, and ultimately killed – by a woman belonging to a group that idolized his mother.

Irving's displacement of the audience serves to show the absurdity of life but also to highlight the absurdity of the way the public consumes life and, therefore, constructs reality. Irving, in an atypical one-sentence paragraph writes, Garp watched his mother's murder on his landlady's TV" (Irving 398). As Kayser observes, this "grotesque world is – and is not – our own world" (Kayser 37). Garp's dislocation as audience, first with the news from Roberta and then on television, mirrors and validates our own.

The final chapter of the novel, "Life After Garp," fuses "the essential elements of the grotesque – the mixture of heterogeneous elements, the confusion, the fantastic quality, and even a kind of alienation of the world" (Kayser 51) -- with a life-affirming look into the future. For Garp and Irving, as for Bakhtin, "[d]eath and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole" (Bakhtin 50). Irving, through Garp, writes that "[a]n epilogue... is more than a body count. An epilogue, in the guise of wrapping up the past, is really a way of warning us about the future" (Irving 468). The word warning here is slippery; it comes with an ominous connotation. However, Garp's final pages are not filled with sadness. Based on the chapter's title and the foreshadowing throughout the novel, the reader knows that Garp will die but the language within is hopeful and provides comfort.

Before and after outlining how Garp's death might have been avoided if Roberta Muldoon had been able to play squash, Irving presents Garp as a writer in the act of creation; he writes for "three hours" in "burst[s]" (Irving 469). He acknowledges that his most recent project, a father and son collaboration and re-printing of *The Pension Grillparzer*, had itself been a "rebirth" and that it had, too, been a "rebirth for him" (469). This mixture of life and death continues throughout the chapter in various ways. After Garp's assassination, "the news... promoted the immediate printing of a third and fourth edition" of the book (475). In death, the



things Garp gave birth to are reinvigorated. Similarly, as Garp leaves his home, the reader is aware he will not return. Garp's goodbye to his wife, "fondl[ing] her breasts," is a life affirming act that is effectively read as a variation on the pregnant hag motif; he is a dead man still hungry for his wife.

Irving once again uses the text duplicitously when Garp tells Donald Whitcomb that starting a novel is "like trying to keep everyone alive, forever. Even the ones who must die in the end. They're the most important to keep alive" (Irving 470). Garp is talking about himself to the man who becomes his biographer. The audience is almost resigned to his death but is comforted knowing that he will live on in Irving's novel; the very act of reading becomes a creative act and the lines between author, character, and audience are further blurred. The truth as an absolute, especially during America's sexual revolution, is impossible to achieve. The placement of the individual – as male or female, as husband, wife or child, as audience or creator, even as an impermeable or untransgressable body – is always suspect in the grotesque. While Uruburu writes that "any system of beliefs which seeks absolutes points in the direction of the gruesome doorway... [because] no final truth exists for all people all the time" (Uruburu 22), the grotesque, in fact, offers the reader the one reassuring universal truth: life begets death begets life.

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